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'Into Every Home, Into Every Body': Organicism and Anti-Statism in the British Anti-Fluoridation Movement, 1952–1960

Abstract

This article argues that the anti-fluoridation campaigns in the 1950s stemmed from concerns about both the increasing 'chemicalization' of food and the growing authority of the state over the private home and individual body. The British Housewives League (BHL), an organization typically thought insignificant after the late 1940s, was in fact at the centre of these campaigns. Steeped in the beliefs of inter-war and wartime organicism, the housewives believed that government intervention in food production and distribution was producing a post-war diet laden with harmful chemicals. The Ministry of Health's proposals to test water fluoridation in select communities in the early 1950s only further convinced the housewives that the state was harming the nation both physically and politically. More and more citizens would have no choice but to drink impure, potentially harmful water, they argued, and the burgeoning state would continue encroaching on private homes and bodies. While scholars have already demonstrated that what we now think of as 'leftist' environmental ideas were popular among 'rightist' movements of the 1930s and 1940s, the anti-fluoridation campaigns show that the BHL continued in the post-war years to intertwine our present-day notions of 'left' and 'right' ideologies.

Introduction

In Andover, the new year of 1957 started with a rehashing of old arguments as the borough council once again debated its controversial

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decision to fluoridate the town's public water supply. The council had accepted an invitation by the Ministry of Health to be a test site for fluoridation in the autumn of 1955 and had started fluoridation the following summer. Opposition to the experiment had emerged soon after the invitation had been extended, and the anti-fluoridation forces had grown more vocal and angry in the subsequent year. A local dentist had retired to fight fluoridation full-time; the town's vicar had denounced fluoridation from his pulpit; and a former mayor had sunk a well in his yard so as to provide his wife with 'pure' water.[1] The proponents of fluoridation had become equally angry in their defence of this seemingly straightforward, beneficial public health measure. In the climatic moment of the meeting on 1 January 1957, one pro-fluoridation alderman even denounced the anti-fluoridation editor of the *Andover Advertiser* as the 'Nasser of journalism'.[2]

While every bit as heated and, indeed, colourful as the fluoridation debates that polarized towns across the USA from the 1950s onwards, the controversy over fluoridation in post-war Britain has received little attention beyond local studies.[3] These studies are appropriate and helpful in that the ultimate decision to fluoridate a public water supply was a local decision that could produce, as in Andover, a drama whose characters and acts were specific to that community. This article argues, however, that the fluoridation controversy was also a drama of national significance as serious disputes over the methods of modern food production and the expansion of state power came into play. The anti-fluoridation movement of the 1950s was in fact steeped in the beliefs and ideals of inter-war and war-time organicism, which promoted a 'holistic vision of soil, agriculture, food processing, eating and waste reuse' in reaction against early twentieth-century 'trends in food

[1] 'Voters' veto campaign is to be organized', *Andover Advertiser*, 10 February 1956, 8; 'Vicar condemns council's fluoridation decision', *Andover Advertiser*, 17 February 1956, 8; 'Former mayor has own ''pure'' water supply', *Andover Advertiser*, 21 September 1956, 4.

[2] 'Council to go on with fluoridation project', *Andover Advertiser*, 4 January 1957, 1, 8.

[3] Paul Castle, *The Politics of Fluoridation: The Campaign for Fluoridation in the West Midlands* (London, 1987); David J. Borrett, *Something in the Water* (Andover, 2002). In contrast, the fluoridation controversy in America has received a great deal of attention as a national controversy. See, for instance, Donald R. McNeil, *The Fight for Fluoridation* (New York, 1957); A. Green, 'Ideology of anti-fluoridation leaders', *Journal of Social Issues*, 17 (1961), 13–25; Brian Martin, *Scientific Knowledge in Controversy: The Social Dynamics of the Fluoridation Debate* (Albany, 1991); Gretchen Ann Reilly, '"This poisoning of our drinking water": the American fluoridation controversy in historical context, 1950–1990', PhD thesis, George Washington University, 2001; Christopher Sellers, 'The artificial nature of fluoridated water: between nations, knowledge and material flows', *Osiris*, 19 (2004), 182–200. Scholars have also looked at the debates over fluoridation in New Zealand and Canada as national controversies. See Jill Wrapson, 'Artificial fluoridation of public water supplies in New Zealand: ''magic bullet'', rat poison, or communist plot?' *Health and History*, 7 (2005), 17–29; Catherine Carstairs and Rachel Elder, 'Expertise, health, and popular opinion: debating water fluoridation, 1945–80', *Canadian Historical Review*, 89 (2008), 345–71.

production, distribution, and consumption'.[4] From this perspective, fluoridation was the addition of one more potentially harmful chemical to a food supply already awash with toxic pesticides, fertilizers and additives. Moreover, the promotion of fluoridation by the Ministry of Health antagonized the anti-statist sentiment that had emerged within the organic movement during the war. Increased state control over food production and consumption had not only expedited the 'chemicalization' of the British diet but also threatened to extend beyond the exigencies of war into a permanently 'planned' society. The post-war state did, of course, assume more responsibility over social welfare and the economy, and its policies both directly and indirectly shaped new dietary norms. For some, fluoridation was a dangerous extension of these trends—a last straw in the burgeoning authority of Whitehall over the private home and individual body. Up to this point, with awareness and effort, one had been able to subvert other state interventions in the food production system. But how could one avoid the water flowing right through his or her kitchen tap?

This article focuses on the years between 1952 and 1960. At the start of this period, the Ministry of Health began discussing appropriate test sites for fluoridation. By early 1955, the Ministry had invited six towns to participate, four of which (Anglesey, Kilmarnock, Andover and Watford) accepted and two of which (Norwich and Darlington) declined.[5] Opposition to fluoridation had surfaced in many of these areas and, at first glance, seems to have been strictly local, given the absence of a national anti-fluoridation organization until the founding of the National Pure Water Association in 1960. Both Ministry files and local newspapers reveal, however, that the middle-class women's organization, the British Housewives League (BHL), and its Scottish counterpart, the Scottish Housewives Association (SHA), were integral in instigating and shaping the local campaigns. Its leaders and members wrote letters to the local newspapers, held public meetings to disseminate information and rally opposition, and organized the 'Voters' Veto', a petition in which citizens pledged not to vote for council candidates who supported fluoridation. As early as January 1954, the Ministry of Health was so wary of the BHL and SHA that it decided to no longer respond to the housewives 'in detail since this only gave them material to select and distort' in their campaigns.[6]

[4] David Matless, 'Bodies made of grass made of earth made of bodies: organicism, diet and national health in mid-twentieth-century England', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 27 (2001), 357.

[5] The British Housewives League noted that Cardiff also declined an invitation, but there is no evidence of an official invitation being extended in the Ministry of Health minutes.

[6] The National Archives: Public Record Office, Kew (TNA:PRO), MH 58/533, Fluoridation Steering Committee meeting minutes, 9 December 1954.

The monthly newsletter of the BHL, *Housewives Today*, confirms that opposition to fluoridation had indeed become a new objective in the organization's broader mission to both encourage a more nourishing national diet and limit state intervention in the private lives of British citizens. These goals had been intertwined since Irene Lovelock, a middle-class housewife, founded the BHL in 1945 to protest a continued rationing.[7] The demand for a greater quantity of food was what initially attracted most fellow housewives to the organization, but the BHL was also concerned about the impact of government intervention in food production and distribution on the quality of the British diet. Influenced by organicist principles, the BHL condemned government-sanctioned additives in white bread, for instance, as chemically tainting a food already lacking the nutritional vitality of wholemeal bread. The promotion of fluoridation by the Ministry of Health only confirmed BHL fears that the government would continue intruding on the British diet to the detriment of both the physical and political well-being of the nation. More and more citizens would have no choice but to drink impure, 'medicated' water as the burgeoning state, however well-intentioned, continued encroaching on the homes of the nation. Fluoridation was, from this perspective, a poisoning of the body politic every bit as much as the physical body. With every new dictate, the state was further shackling the individual and thereby destroying the traditional liberties and freedoms of the British nation.

The housewives' campaigns against fluoridation provide an interesting counterpoint to Gregory Field's recent observations about anti-fluoridationists in early post-war America. Urging his fellow US historians to complicate the traditional portrait of anti-fluoridationists as paranoid Cold Warriors—a caricature immortalized by General Jack D. Ripper in Stanley Kubrick's 1964 film, *Dr Strangelove: Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*—Field has pointed to a nascent 'green' movement as the seedbed of the early anti-fluoridation movement in the USA.[8] It was only in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Field argues, that this 'green' opposition to fluoridation gave way to a more Ripper-esque opposition. In their organicist fears and motivations, the BHL campaigns were indeed similar to these early anti-fluoridation efforts in the USA. But the housewives were also motivated by the

[7] Scholarship on the BHL has remained focused on the early years of the organization. For an excellent investigation of the origins and political allegiances of the League in the late 1940s, see James Hinton, 'Militant housewives: the British Housewives' League and the Attlee Government', *History Workshop Journal*, 38 (1994), 129–56. On the conservative ideology of the organization, see Beatrix Campbell, *The Iron Ladies: Why Do Women Vote Tory?* (London, 1987), 75–82.

[8] Gregory Field, 'Flushing poisons from the body politic: the fluoride controversy and American political culture, 1955–1965', in Jurgen Heideking, Jorg Helbig and Anke Ortlepp (eds), *The Sixties Revisited* (Heidelberg, 2001), 469–85.

Orwellian nightmares of a totalitarian future that Field identifies as characteristic of the second phase in American anti-fluoridationism. They were less worried about a direct Soviet takeover than their American counterparts, but they did see 'Big Brother' looming in this new public health policy and feared that their nation was inexorably walking down the road to serfdom. The British battle against fluoridation cannot, in other words, be segmented as neatly as Field has argued for the USA; the housewives' faith in organicism went hand in hand with their fear of a totalitarian state.

In this regard, the anti-fluoridation efforts in 1950s Britain highlight the frailty of the political categories of 'left' and 'right' in historical analysis. Scholars have already demonstrated that what we now think of as 'leftist' environmental ideas were popular among 'rightist', even fascist movements in the inter-war and war-time periods.[9] The campaigns against fluoridation show that the BHL continued to intertwine our present-day notions of 'left' and 'right' ideologies in the post-war period, albeit in new and complex ways. As fluoridation became an increasingly contested issue on the national stage during the 1960s, this ideological legacy continued to inform the terms of the public debate. The 'Open Letter' by twenty-six MPs (fourteen Labour and twelve Conservative) against fluoridation in July 1965, for instance, emphasized two familiar points: the uncertain 'action of fluorides on the human body' and the 'erosion of personal freedom'.[10]

This study also demonstrates that the BHL deserves investigation beyond its initial anti-rationing activities in the late 1940s.[11] Not only did the housewives challenge a major initiative of the Ministry of Health, but they simultaneously challenged their members to become more educated, more active citizens. Well-informed, committed protest, they argued, was the only way to defend one's home against the tyranny of the state expert and bureaucrat. In this regard, the BHL was like other middle-class, conservative women's organizations of the post-war period (such as the Mothers' Union, the Women's Institutes and the Townswomen's Guilds) in that it maintained a domestic ideal of womanhood while also promoting 'active and responsible' citizenship.[12] In 1955, a branch chairman of the BHL warned fellow members

[9] David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London, 1998), esp. Ch. 3 and Ch. 4; Philip Conford, *The Origins of the Organic Movement* (Edinburgh, 2001), esp. Ch. 9; Dan Stone, 'The far right and the back-to-the-land movement', in Julie V. Gottlieb and Thomas P. Linehan (eds), *The Culture of Fascism: Visions of the Far Right in Britain* (London, 2004), 182–98.

[10] 'Fluoridation of water supplies', *The Times*, 12 July 1965, 11.

[11] Hinton, 'Militant housewives'; Campbell, *The Iron Ladies*.

[12] Caitriona Beaumont, 'Housewives, workers and citizens: voluntary women's organisations and the campaign for women's rights in England and the post-war period', in Nick Crowson, Matthew Hilton, James McKay (eds), *NGOs in Contemporary Britain: Non-State Actors in Society and Politics* (New York, 2009), 59–76. Also see

that 'The world is made up of the few who make things happen; the many who watch things happen; and the vast majority who don't care what happens as long as it doesn't happen to them'. The anti-fluoridation campaign encouraged housewives to count themselves among the few by demanding that the state leave their homes, and bodies, alone.[13]

Housewives Versus the 'Chemical Dragon'

The perceived benefits of fluoridation were straightforward to public health officials: at 1 parts per million (ppm) in the public water supply, fluoride was believed to be a safe and an inexpensive means of significantly reducing dental decay among a new generation of Britons. The USA had conducted the first experiments with artificial fluoridation in 1945, and the US Public Health Service issued its endorsement of the practice just five years into the trials. Endorsements by the American Dental Association and the American Medical Association followed soon thereafter, and the early 1950s witnessed a rapid spread of fluoridation programmes across the USA.[14] In 1952, the British Ministry of Health sent a mission to the USA to investigate the practice and benefits of fluoridation, and it quickly moved towards setting up trials in Britain. By the end of 1955, fluoridation had started in Anglesey; by the end of 1956, it was also underway in Kilmarnock, Watford and Andover.[15]

By the time the Ministry of Health started planning the experiments with fluoridation, the BHL had diminished greatly in size from its peak popularity in the late 1940s and would not have seemed a particularly formidable opponent. A highly publicized power struggle within the organization in 1947 had undermined its credibility, and a membership of 15,000 in early 1948 had dropped to 3,000 by the end of that year.[16] The BHL's monthly newsletter, *Housewives Today*, reveals a core of women, however, who adjusted to their diminished size by emphasizing strategy. In September 1949, B.M. Palmer, a League officer, explained, 'If you can't beat the enemy by over-whelming force, then the quickest way is to disrupt him.' Her 'Simple Rules for Campaigners' included 'conduct[ing] as many small but *successful* campaigns as you

Beaumont, 'Citizens not feminists: the boundary negotiated between citizenship and feminism by mainstream women's organizations in England, 1928–1939', *Women's History Review*, 9 (2000), 411–29. On the middle-class identity of the BHL, see Hinton, 'Militant housewives', 137–9.

[13] 'Housewives and the cost of living', *Housewives Today* (*HT*), 7 (May 1955), 3.

[14] Brian Martin, 'Analyzing the fluoridation controversy: resources and structures', *Social Studies of Science*, 18 (1988), 333–4.

[15] TNA:PRO, MH 58/533, Fluoridation Steering Committee meeting minutes.

[16] Hinton, 'Militant housewives', 145–8.

can in different localities'.[17] Palmer was only speaking in generalities at this point, but her guidelines foretold the nature of the battle that the BHL would wage against fluoridation in the years to come. Several housewives invested considerable time and energy in publicly challenging every benefit and assurance promised by the Ministry. The most active were Winifred Sykes, the vice-chairman of the League, and Elizabeth Pattullo, the secretary of the SHA, who wrote many letters to the local newspapers of prospective test sites, as well as organized and spoke at protest meetings in these localities. Doris Grant, a BHL member and author of numerous nutritional guides published by Faber and Faber, included warnings on fluoridation in her new publications, while members living in the test sites themselves helped generate community support.

This opposition to fluoridation was rooted in a profound anxiety about the modern food supply system. The BHL was notorious for its anti-rationing antics—a tumultuous rally at the Royal Albert Hall in 1947, the burning of rationing books in front of Parliament in 1951—but its concerns about government involvement in food production and consumption extended beyond the issue of quantity to the issue of quality. In 1954, Grant asked her fellow housewives:

> [D]o you know that there is hardly an honest food left to buy? . . . do you know just how artificial, how tampered-with, how man-interfered-with our foodstuffs are to-day? . . . Nearly all the foods that go on to our table are so changed, so processed and chemicalized, that all their original goodness is either removed or killed.[18]

For the BHL, there was no greater example of this 'dead' food than white bread. Not only did the processing of wheat into white flour remove the most vital and nutritious parts of the grain, but bakers then introduced chemical additives to bleach impurities, facilitate the rising process and—rather ironically—bolster the nutrient content. In conjunction with the artificial fertilizers and pesticides increasingly used by modern farmers, such processes transformed the once wholesome loaf of bread into a food that was, at best, nutritionally empty and, at worst, potentially hazardous. An additive that was innocuous in the short term, Grant warned, could become a 'cumulative poison' in the long term, and scientists would not know for years to come (25). As the BHL complained with regard to the addition of agene (nitrogen trichloride) to bread, 'what may be recommended in one generation becomes the poison of the next'.[19] Such concerns ultimately produced the organization's 1952 resolution demanding that the Minister of Food and the

[17] 'Making history', *HT*, 2 (September 1949), 3.
[18] Doris Grant, *Dear Housewives* (London, 1954), 21.
[19] *HT*, 4 (1951), 8.

Minister of Health 'appoint a Royal Commission to enquire into the contamination of Food Stuffs; both accidental additives from pesticidal residues and deliberate additives in food processing, preparation and packaging'.[20]

In challenging the new methods of modern food production, the BHL drew on the British organic movement, which had emerged in the inter-war years and continued growing during and after the Second World War. As Philip Conford has argued, the core ideas of organicism were not in themselves new but they only coalesced into a 'movement' as the practices of the 'New Agriculture'—mechanization, increased scale, specialization and use of chemical fertilizers—threatened the traditional farming methods of Britain. From the organic perspective, the benefits of industrialized agriculture would be short-lived at best. Increased productivity per worker would only mask the decreasing productivity of the land itself as monocultures and chemicals depleted the fertility of the soil. Only by observing the 'Rule of Return'—i.e. returning the composted remains of crops to the soil to create humus—could farmers sustain the fecundity of their land. Unfortunately for organicists, the Second World War was a period in which the pronounced, immediate leaps in efficiency and productivity offered by the new agricultural methods were attractive. They retained their appeal in the aftermath of the war as shortages of both food and money continued to trouble the British state, and the Agriculture Act of 1947 ensured their prevalence in post-war agricultural policy. A veritable revolution in agriculture occurred as 'the output of agricultural machinery' rose from '£2.5m in 1938–9 . . . to £100m by 1951' and the government-subsidized purchase of artificial fertilizers 'increased from £8m in 1937–8 to £51m in 1950–1'.[21]

By the early 1950s, the BHL was every bit as aggrieved by these agricultural trends as by continued rationing, and its arguments and initiatives reflected a close familiarity with the key figures and ideas of the organic movement. In her 1944 publication, *Our Daily Bread*, Grant acknowledged Sir Albert Howard, whose agricultural research in early twentieth-century India became the experiential foundation of British organicism.[22] His nineteen years at the Agricultural Research Institute in Pusa, followed by his directorship of the Institute of Plant Industry in Indore from 1924 to 1931, led him to conclude that the health of a plant is directly related to the health of the soil. Soil enriched with humus, he argued, produced vegetation that was stronger and more resistant to disease and pests than vegetation grown in soil where the microbial life had been depleted. Howard died in 1947, just two years

[20] Annual General Meeting report, *HT*, 4 (1952), 2.
[21] Philip Conford, *Origins*, 17, 29–41.
[22] Doris Grant, *Your Daily Bread* (London, 1944).

after the BHL was founded, but the housewives interacted with the people and organizations that continued promulgating his ideas. In November 1952, the Brighton branch hosted a speaker from the Albert Howard Foundation of Organic Husbandry, while Lady Eve Balfour, author of *The Living Soil* (1943) and founder-member of the Soil Association (SA), addressed the League in London.[23] In 1953, *Housewives Today* featured an article in which another SA founder-member, T.H. Sanderson-Wells, discussed the work of Howard at length. The newsletter also excerpted an article from the SA journal, *Mother Earth*, to highlight an experiment in which the regular application of chemical fertilizers to plants produced measurably weaker, less disease-resistant seeds by the fifth generation.[24]

Organicism was most readily apparent, however, in the BHL's attitude towards nutrition and health. As both Conford and Matless note, the organic movement promoted a holistic approach to the well-being of the human body. Health was more than the absence of disease; it was also a positive state of vigour and vitality.[25] In this regard, medicinal cures were less important than the preventive properties of good nutrition. Wholesome food produced vigorous and vital bodies just as humus-rich soil produced strong and resilient plants. While Howard's work with cattle at Pusa demonstrated these principles, it was the research of another scientist in India—Sir Robert McCarrison—that more thoroughly explored the connections between diet and physical well-being. His most famous experiment involved testing the effects of a traditional Sikh diet (fresh dairy, vegetables, whole grains and limited meat) and a typical British diet (tea with sugar and milk, tinned vegetables, white bread and margarine and tinned meat) on more than 2,000 rats. The results exemplified the benefits of fresh, unprocessed foods: not only were the 'typically British' rats smaller in size and more susceptible to disease and gastro-intestinal problems, they were also more aggressive in temperament.[26]

[23] 'The Brighton branch', *HT*, 5 (November 1952), 9; 'Lady Eve's address', *HT*, 5 (December 1953), 1.

[24] 'Education and the foundations of health', *HT*, 4 (December 1953), 2–7; 'The sins of the fathers', *HT*, 5 (February 1953), 4.

[25] For more on holistic attitudes towards physical health in the inter-war years, see Christopher Lawrence, 'Still incommunicable: clinical holists and medical knowledge in interwar Britain', in Christopher Lawrence and George Weisz (eds), *Greater Than the Parts: Holism in Biomedicine, 1920–1950* (New York, 1998), 94–111; Abigail Beach, 'Potential for participation: health centres and the idea of citizenship, *c.* 1920–1940', in Christopher Lawrence and Anna K. Mayer (eds) *Regenerating England: Science, Medicine, and Culture in Inter-war Britain* (Amsterdam, 2000), 203–30; Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Raising a nation of ''good animals'': the new health society and health education campaigns in interwar Britain', *Social History of Medicine*, 20 (2007), 73–89.

[26] Conford, *Origins*, 50–3; Matless, *Landscape*, 155–7.

The organicist understanding of nutrition as the bedrock of health informed the BHL at every turn. In *Your Daily Bread*, Grant explicitly contrasted 'negative health'—i.e. merely being happy with not being ill—with 'positive health', which she characterized as an 'exhilarating sense of well-being, the joy of physical fitness, the power of accomplishment no matter how hard the task'. She promised that a diet of fresh, unprocessed food would save Britons from that 'lethargic, unenterprising twilight-betwixt well and ill' and allow them to enjoy true health. A mother who replaced purchased white bread with her own homemade, wholemeal loaf, she assured, would notice a transformation in her family:

> She would begin to notice unbelievable changes taking place: she would find that the children's appetite had improved out of all recognition, that Mary's indigestion and nerviness was quickly disappearing, that Baby John was growing twice as fast and three times as lovely; that her own habitual tiredness and depression had given place to unbounded energy and optimism; that even her husband's uncertain temper was improving—especially at the breakfast table.[27]

Housewives Today also stressed the importance of fresh, unprocessed foods as the foundation of a truly healthy family. Noting members' complaints about the addition of 'blood plasma' to food stuffs, one article commented that this was 'unfortunately . . . no worse than a hundred other processes to which our food has been subjected for decades—sterilising, pasteurising, bleaching, concentrating, and all the rest of it'.[28] Whatever good intentions lay behind these processes, the result was the same: 'dead' food, stripped of its natural wholesomeness and thereby rendering the whole system of modern food production fundamentally illogical. As Sykes wrote in a letter to the *Sunday Times* regarding pasteurization:

> It is possible that those who advocate pasteurization may be attempting to cure one disease only to produce others. Recent American observations on animals have shown that various processed milk diets, of which pasteurized milk was one, produce many of the degenerative diseases familiar in human medicine. Dental authorities claim that pasteurized milk is not so conducive to dental health as raw milk.[29]

Modern food production was, in short, locked in a vicious cycle. Processed foods denied consumers the nutrients necessary for physical

[27] Grant, *Your Daily Bread*, 15.
[28] *HT*, 3 (October 1950), 5.
[29] 'Pasteurized milk', *HT*, 5 (January 1953), 9.

vigour and disease resistance; producers then developed new processes to protect the now weakened body from illness; but these new processes subsequently weakened the body in other, unexpected ways and thereby restarted the cycle.

From the perspective of the BHL, fluoridation was but one more of these processes, designed to correct the problems wrought by other changes in food production but likely to leave more problems in its wake. Tooth decay was, the housewives argued, another negative effect of the unwholesome, over-processed diet of Britons. Children who ate wholemeal bread and fresh meat and produce would develop strong teeth from both consuming proper nutrients and chewing on substantive foods. This diet would also reduce the consumption of refined sugar, the real culprit of dental caries. Instead of promoting this sensible course of prevention, however, the government was endorsing yet another chemical additive as a scientific cure. 'Dental caries are largely due to the artificial foods that modern science has produced for us', Grant explained in a letter to the *Andover Advertiser* in 1956. '. . . . To counteract the results of these artificial foods Science produces something even more artificial—fluoridation—to hold things in line, until the final result is a fearful, synthetic Frankenstein which can run amok at any moment.'[30]

As for the actual, physical danger posed by fluoride, the BHL believed the chemical would become yet another cumulative poison in the human body. Pattullo frequently claimed that fluoride from factory emissions and fertilizers killed cattle on her Angus farm in the early 1950s,[31] while other housewives suggested an array of ailments and diseases—brittle teeth, thyroid problems and cancer—as the unintended side-effects soon to plague Britons.[32] It was common, in this regard, for the League to point to dissenting opinion about the safety of fluoride within the scientific community,[33] but the BHL also posed a more general argument about the transience of any scientific consensus. Even if all medical experts currently agreed that the consumption of fluoride was safe at 1ppm, they argued, future discoveries could prove them wrong. Not only could new research uncover unexpected problems at any moment, but the problems themselves might not arise for many years. The aforementioned *Mother Earth* article on the negative effects of

[30] 'Strongly against', *Andover Advertiser*, 20 January 1956, 5.
[31] 'The Perth rally', *HT*, 5 (July 1953), 4–5; 'Mrs. Pattullo's experience of fluorine poisoning', *Northern Echo*, 7 November 1955, 6.
[32] 'Fluorides in water supply', *Andover Advertiser*, 11 November 1955, 8; 'This fluorine business', *HT*, 6 (October 1953), 2.
[33] Sykes, in particular, took reading the scientific literature on fluoridation as a serious responsibility. She was often the person who highlighted dissenting opinion. See, for instance, 'Many Darlingtonians sign fluoridation protest', *Northern Echo*, 7 April 1955, 6, and 'Mass dosing', *Andover Advertiser*, 16 December 1955, 7.

chemical fertilizers on the fifth generation of seeds illustrated this latter point perfectly. At the end of the article, *Housewives Today* immediately drew a direct parallel: even if fluoridation did not seem a health hazard in the short term, future generations of Britons might in fact suffer from the accumulated, insidious harm of many years.

While the BHL remained the organizational voice for anti-fluoridation campaigns in the 1950s, others within the organic movement shared its doubts about the safety of the experiments. The Ministry of Health was unfamiliar with the SA when the organization requested a speaker on the topic of fluoridation in 1956, but an officer soon concluded that the event would 'undoubtedly be a lion's den. Mr Brodie Carpenter, who is an influential member of the Soil Association, is also the dentist quoted by the anti-fluoridationists in Watford. I should question that his view—and policy—will be very much in line with that of the Housewives League.'[34] The greatest source of public support, however, was Lord Douglas of Barloch, who had been protesting the increased chemicalization and processing of food since his years as Labour MP for Battersea North in the early 1940s. In 1943, he engaged in a lengthy debate with Lord Woolton over the pasteurization of milk;[35] and, in a letter to Aneurin Bevan in 1946, he praised a London County Council experiment with composting and urged the new Minister of Health to consider a scheme in which all London refuse and sewage would be composted for the production of natural fertilizer for the countryside.[36] In the early 1950s, Barloch gave a series of speeches in the House of Lords in which he warned about the health hazards posed by an increasingly chemical-laden diet, including fluoridated water.[37] The BHL sent Barloch a letter of support after one such speech in January 1954,[38] from which point onwards he became an ally in their anti-fluoridation battle. Barloch spoke at an SHA-organized meeting against fluoridation in Kilmarnock in November 1954,[39] for instance, and he contributed to the debate that waged on the letters page of the *Andover Advertiser* in 1956.[40]

The housewives were therefore not alone in their battle against what Grant had deemed the 'chemical dragon' of modern food production.[41] But the BHL and SHA did assume the central role in instigating

[34] TNA:PRO, MH 55/2178, exchange of notes regarding request by Soil Association for speaker suggestion, 29 March 1956–5 April 1956.
[35] London School of Economics Archives (LSE), Lord Douglas of Barloch papers, Box 6, letters between Barloch and Woolton, 7 January 1943–22 March 1943.
[36] LSE, Lord Douglas of Barloch papers, Box 2, letter to Bevan, 4 April 1946.
[37] *Parliamentary Debates* (Lords), 172, 4 July 1951, 624–52; *Parliamentary Debates* (Lords), 174, 29 January 1952, 900–15; *Parliamentary Debates* (Lords), 185, 27 January 1954, 488–522.
[38] *HT*, 6 (March 1954), 1.
[39] 'Fluorine flare-up in Kilmarnock', *Kilmarnock Standard*, 13 November 1954, 5.
[40] 'Infringement of personal liberty', *Andover Advertiser*, 27 January 1956, 8.
[41] Doris Grant, *Housewives Beware* (London, 1958), 5.

protests against fluoridation in the prospective test sites. They believed the battle for pure water was in fact a struggle of fundamental import to the nation. Processes such as fluoridation, the League argued, were corrosive to the physical health of the individual and, therefore, to the strength of the nation as a whole. As the next section will contend, the state endorsement and/or enforcement of many such processes only intensified the threat of this chemical dragon in the eyes of the BHL. Every time Whitehall issued a new dictate concerning the food and drink regularly consumed by individual Britons, the state took another step outside its appropriate ambit of power. The chemical assault on the physical body therefore signalled an even greater problem: a political assault on the civil liberties of the nation.

Housewives Versus the 'Gentlemen in Whitehall'

'We have not yet reached ''1984''; but if you let him, BIG BROTHER IS COMING TO YOU, into every home, into every body, through the water tap.'[42] In this one line, the pamphlet published by the Darlington Anti-Fluoridation Committee captured the perception of fluoridation as a simultaneously physical and political threat. Fluoridation, the pamphlet continued, 'would be a precedent for using the water supply for dosing the public with any drug favoured by officials, and for gradually abandoning the practice of individual and medical attention and responsibility'. The BHL, which had directed a local member to organize the Darlington Anti-Fluoridation Committee, had long complained about the growing power of Whitehall bureaucrats over their homes and, more specifically, their kitchens. Fluoridation therefore signalled a permanent conduit—the kitchen tap—for state intrusions into the sacred space of housewives.

The BHL was not the first organization to intertwine what we would now consider a 'leftist' environmentalism with a 'rightist' political ideology. Before and during the Second World War, organicism had often appealed to those who sought to escape capitalism and communism alike by resurrecting England's rural past. As Matless indicates, it is impossible to subsume these rightist organicists under one ideological label as their 'reference points' for an ideal socio-political order included 'High Toryism, guild socialism, imperialism, [and] fascism'.[43] It is clear, however, that organicism did sometimes underpin the racist, anti-Semitic sentiments of the Far Right in this period. Groups such as English Array and the Kinship in Husbandry, for instance, scorned the Jewish financier as the cause of an increasingly profit-oriented and

[42] 'Hands off our water, say townspeople', *Northern Echo*, 14 April 1955, 5.
[43] Matless, *Landscape*, 118.

industrialized agricultural system, while anxiety about national health and diet dovetailed neatly with eugenicist concerns about the quality of English 'stock'.[44] As the government assumed greater control over food production and consumption during the war, organicists also directed their fire at the expanding British state. This stemmed in part from frustration with many of the aforementioned methods employed by the government to increase production during the war. But the growth of the centralized state also threatened the rightist vision of the rural village as the ideal socio-economic community. The London bureaucrat was a far cry from 'the responsible locally embedded landlord',[45] and Whitehall's continued acquisition of power during the war—and the likely continuation of this trend after the war—sparked as much concern as the application of chemical fertilizers. Indeed, one founder-member of the Kinship, Rolf Gardiner, identified the goal of the group as protesting against both inorganic farming methods and the establishment of a 'bureaucratic or managerial Welfare State' after the war.[46]

The BHL continued this tradition of a rightist strain in the organic movement after the war, although it differed from its predecessors in significant ways. First, though one prominent Housewife had been involved with an anti-Semitic group during the war, the League did not echo the explicit racism of the more extreme inter-war and wartime organizations.[47] Concerns about national health did not drift into eugenicist language, for instance, nor were Jews identified as a social or economic threat. Hinton notes, in fact, that Lovelock consciously distanced herself from an unintended, anti-Semitic ally in the first year of the BHL.[48] A second difference was that the League did not inherit the inter-war rightist perception of modern society as trapped between the twin nightmares of capitalism and communism. The League was instead shaped by—and, of course, helped shape—post-war fears of totalitarianism. The horrors of Nazism and Stalinism were one and the same from this perspective, although the continued existence of the Soviet dictatorship and the Cold War made communism the greater, more immediate threat. Citing Friedrich von Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) as a book of 'tremendous impact',[49] *Housewives Today* cast the potential paths for post-war Britain in explicitly Hayekian terms.

[44] Conford, *Origins*, 146–54; Stone, 'The far right', 182–98. As both Conford and Stone note, not everyone affiliated with these organizations necessarily deserves the label 'fascist' or 'anti-Semitic'.

[45] Matless, *Landscape*, 125.

[46] Rolf Gardiner, 'Can farming save European civilisation?', in A. Best (ed.) *Water Springing From the Ground: An Anthology of the Writings of Rolf Gardiner* (Fontmell Magna, 1972), 196–8. Quoted in Matless, *Landscape*, 104.

[47] Hinton, 'Militant housewives', 135. This was the aforementioned B.M. Palmer, who was involved with Social Credit in 1940.

[48] Hinton, 'Militant housewives', 135.

[49] 'A memorable book', *HT*, 5 (November 1952), 7.

Either Britain restricted the power of the state and maintained a free society, or it allowed the ineluctable expansion of governmental authority into totalitarianism. There was, in other words, only one decision for Britons to make in the post-war world: to be free or not to be free.

The BHL did not fear, in this sense, a hostile takeover of Britain by Communists. What they feared was their own nation unwittingly walking down the road to serfdom by failing to realize how even well-intentioned government interventions eroded liberty. Hayek provided the 'either/or' scenario that informed BHL visions of the future, but it was to *The New Despotism* (1929) by Lord Hewart of Bury that the BHL turned to explain the precise mechanics by which the British state was turning away from freedom. The Lord Chief Justice from 1922 to 1940, Hewart had warned that British bureaucrats were increasingly acquiring powers that were unchecked by either the judiciary or Parliament. The responsibilities granted by legislation to governmental ministries were so broad and so unrestricted, he argued, that the bureaucratic elite were in effect establishing a new despotism in Britain. Less greedy for power than thoroughly confident in the benefits of their expertise, these new despots continued expanding the authority of Whitehall while average citizens remained unaware of the damage to representative government and the rule of law. '[T]he whole scheme of self-government is being undermined', he warned, '. . . in a way which no self-respecting people, if they were aware of the facts, would for a moment tolerate'.[50]

While the Donoughmore Commission had concluded in 1932 that the powers of Whitehall posed no threat to the political traditions of Britain, the BHL resurrected Hewart's fears less than two decades later as it sought to protect the traditional realm of female authority—the family home—from bureaucratic interference. It was, indeed, the domestic ideal of women as skilled and knowledgeable housewives that underlay the BHL attack on the post-war state, just as the rural ideal of responsible landlords had underpinned the anti-statism of groups like the Kinship. The League saw Whitehall as robbing housewives of their time-honoured responsibility for the education, nourishment and health of the nation by foisting the opinions of 'so called experts' on private homes and families. As proof of the contempt with which housewives were treated in the new Welfare State, *Housewives Today* highlighted the infamous section from *The Socialist Case* (1937) in which Douglas Jay asserted that the expertise of 'the gentlemen in Whitehall' surpassed that of British women on key domestic matters: 'Housewives as a whole cannot be trusted to buy all the right things, where nutrition and health

[50] Lord Hewart of Bury, *The New Despotism* (London, 1929), 16.

are concerned.'[51] Jay, who had become Labour MP for Battersea North in 1946 and Economic Secretary to the Treasury soon thereafter, bore a great deal of criticism for this statement of faith in Whitehall expertise,[52] but it was the housewives who specifically condemned the gendered nature of the comment. The Whitehall gentleman was, one article argued, the 'Victorian father' reborn: 'He tells us over and over that Father knows best.'[53]

This frustration with the erosion of their power as housewives fuelled BHL denunciations of the government involvement in post-war food production every bit as much as their organicist concerns. With every state effort to 'improve' food for the British consumer, the League saw one more affront to the freedom of housewives to choose what their families ate—and, therefore, one more step towards the New Despotism foreseen by Hewart. When the League protested the addition of calcium to bread and iodine to salt in 1950, for instance, its letter to the Minister of Food conveyed these broader concerns:

> We do not deny that the Government can quote 'eminent authorities' as recommending these things. . . . we take our stand on the principle that members of the public *must* be free to choose for themselves whether they will, or will not, take the medicine recommended. That any Minister should be in a position to dose the whole nation is reminiscent of Eastern despotism.[54]

From the League's perspective, the passage of the Food and Drugs Amendment Bill in 1954 was confirmation that such despotism had arrived. The statute allowing the Ministry of Food to require, prohibit or regulate additional substances in food if 'expedient' was, the BHL Chairman argued, exactly the kind of bureaucratic power about which Hewart had warned. Indeed, she insisted, 'The Ministers today have powers which make the Divine Right of the Stuarts look positively insignificant.' The fact that a Conservative government had passed this bill also confirmed that the Labour Party did not bear sole responsibility for this creeping statism: 'No wonder Prof. Hayek dedicated his remarkable book . . . "to the Socialists of all Parties".'[55]

The plans for fluoridation further aggravated these BHL anxieties about the growth of bureaucratic power at the expense of individual liberty. From the League's perspective, fluoridation was compulsory mass medication, plain and simple, and was thereby one more attack

[51] 'A little ship', *HT*, 4 (April 1952), 1.
[52] For a good overview of responses to the comment, see Richard Toye, '"The gentlemen in Whitehall" reconsidered: the evolution of Douglas Jay's views on economic planning and consumer choice, 1937–47', *Labour History Review*, 67 (2002), 187–204.
[53] 'The Victorian father lives in Whitehall', *HT*, 6 (November 1953), 7.
[54] *HT*, 2 (May 1950), 5.
[55] 'Clean food or pure food? Why not both?', *HT*, 6 (February 1954), 2.

on the freedom of British citizens. Of course, the fact that fluoride would flow right through the kitchen tap made it seem an even greater threat than other chemical additives because there would be so few means of escape for the average housewife. Agenized flour was relatively easy to avoid, after all, by purchasing untreated wholemeal flour and baking one's own bread. Some BHL branches even went so far as to purchase and sell wholemeal flour themselves if their local grocers and bakers refused to do so.[56] Fluoridation via the public water supply would be far more difficult for the housewife to avoid as sinking a well or hauling water from an untreated source was not an easy, or even a possible, option for everyone. In this regard, the BHL encouraged the Ministry of Health to consider alternative modes of delivery, including the addition of fluoride to salt (allowing for the continued sale of untreated salt, of course) or the provision of fluoride tablets for those who were interested.[57] These options would both preserve the freedom of the housewife and encourage her sense of responsibility by allowing her to choose what was best for her family. After all, one did not want the 'few careless mothers there are, to be even more careless, and to leave their children entirely to the gentlemen in Whitehall', complained one *Housewives Today* article. 'We want mothers to become more responsible, not *less* responsible.'[58]

As the plans for fluoridation unfolded, the League was only more convinced that Whitehall was assuming ever greater independence within the British political system. Even before the British commission left to study fluoridation trials in the USA, *Housewives Today* quoted an anonymous source who had warned the League that the Ministry of Health was more of a threat in this matter than 'any local body'. '[I]f the Ministry gives a general direction in the matter, or general permission', he warned, 'it is doubtful whether any public water authority will need any other sanction for adding fluorine to the water supply.'[59] This warning seems to have set the housewives on high alert, reflected in letters to the Ministry of Health in 1953 that asked about the legality of fluoridation and whether local councils and citizens would be given a full opportunity to discuss their inclusion in such studies.[60] This direct pressure by the BHL and the SHA, and their instigation of similar concerns within the test site communities, likely pushed officials towards a measure that further inflamed the housewives: the indemnification of local councils against legal costs if

[56] 'Leeds branch report', *HT*, 6 (September 1953), 4.
[57] See, for instance, TNA:PRO, HLG 50/2557, letters to Macmillan, 22 May 1952 and 29 May 1952.
[58] 'This fluorine business', *HT*, 6 (October 1953), 2.
[59] 'First bread—now water', *HT*, 5 (October 1952), 5.
[60] TNA:PRO, HLG 50/2557, letter from Mary Blakey to Ministry of Health, 19 October 1953 and letter from SHL to Ministry of Health, 29 October 1953.

fluoridation was challenged.[61] From one perspective, of course, the measure suggested the extent to which government officials saw their policy decisions as still circumscribed by the law. From the housewives' perspective, however, such actions were 'inciting' councils 'to flout the law' and revealing the Ministry's 'contempt for the rights of the citizens'.[62] This was the Whitehall of which Hewart had warned—doing whatever it pleased, with no regard for the political traditions of the nation.

Like the anti-fluoridationist movement in the USA, the BHL also raised questions about the role of American industries in promoting fluoridation as a public health measure. *Housewives Today* occasionally referenced, for instance, the theory that the American aluminium industry had pushed such schemes as a means of selling one of its major by-products, fluoride.[63] The League also complained that the American firm which had sold Britain the machinery to add agene to flour was the same firm which produced the fluoridation apparatus needed by water supply stations.[64] On one level, this finger-pointing at 'big business' was as paradoxical for the housewives as for their Cold Warrior counterparts in the USA. The criticism of profit-seeking companies in a capitalist economy did not, after all, mesh particularly well with apocalyptic warnings of communism. On another level, though, such complaints about the influence of American business on Britain also served to underscore the supposed intellectual poverty of bureaucrats. '[M]any of the medical officers who have been pushing fluoridation have confessed to me that they have done absolutely no research whatsoever', claimed Pattullo. '[T]hey have only believed the propaganda sent to them from America.'[65]

Ultimately, theories of American influence did not become a significant element of the housewives' attacks on fluoridation; they remained too committed to exposing the threat *within* the British state to devote

[61] It is unclear whether indemnification was offered to the local councils of each test site. The Secretary of State for Scotland did offer it to the Kilmarnock council, and the Darlington Anti-Fluoridation Committee reported a similar offer to its local council. See *HT*, 6 (June 1954), 12; 'Hands off our water, say townspeople', Darlington *Northern Echo*, 14 April 1955, 5.

[62] *HT*, 6 (June 1954), 12.

[63] The role of the aluminium industry in promoting fluoridation remains a point of contention in fluoridation debates today. Carstairs and Elder characterize the supposed connections between ALCOA and the promotion of fluoridation by the US Public Health Service as unfounded. Brian Martin argues that the aluminium industry gained far more 'symbolic benefits' than 'material benefits' from fluoridation, i.e. the perception of fluoride as a healthy substance meant the public would not see its fluoride emissions as harmful. Carstairs and Elder, 'Expertise', 365; Martin, 'Analyzing the fluoridation controversy.

[64] 'The by-products of the aluminium industry', *HT*, 6 (October 1953), 5. Also see 'First bread—now water'.

[65] 'Mrs. Pattullo's experience of fluorine poisoning'.

much energy to potential enemies on the outside. A 1959 BHL pamphlet, 'Fluoridation. Why and how to stop it', indeed argued that the 'matter cut across party politics . . . because it is an invasion of fundamental human rights against which people of all parties and no party must stand together as they would against a foreign invader'.[66] In a society that had largely come to accept the state as a benevolent provider of social and economic assistance, the housewives were insistent that this same state was in fact becoming the next great enemy to British freedom. Fluoridation was, they insisted, just one more step in the 'growing tyranny of the bureaucratic State'.[67]

Conclusion

The housewives perceived fluoridation as an issue of national significance in that it threatened both the physical and political health of Britain. The 'gentlemen in Whitehall' may have proposed fluoridation with good intentions, they argued, but the long-term consequences would be far worse than any short-term benefits. Physically, Britons might face untold damage to their bodies as they consumed yet one more chemical in their increasingly chemical-laden diets. Politically, the negative effects were certain. Fluoridation was, in and of itself, compulsory mass medication and, therefore, an affront to the liberty of the individual. This intrusion on the traditional freedom of Britons would only continue, the housewives warned, as citizens continued to relinquish responsibility for their families—and, indeed, their own selves—to the state. '[R]esponsibility has seeped away from the individual', *Housewives Today* complained in 1954. 'If it is the price that must be paid for the Welfare State, it is too high [a] price. We shall eventually be reduced to the merest infantilism, a bunch of ZOMBIES.'[68]

This was, of course, a 'rightist' attitude towards state intervention in 1950s Britain, and the housewives' campaign against fluoridation confirms Beatrix Campbell's characterization of the organization as an ideological ancestor of the 'New Right' of the 1980s.[69] But the anti-statism of the BHL should not obscure the equally significant strain of organicist thought in the League's ideas and motives. Like rightist movements of the preceding decades, the BHL believed that the modernization of food production was destroying the national diet and risking the health of future generations. The 'dead' food produced by

[66] British Library, British Housewives League Unbound Pamphlets, 'Fluoridation. Why and how to stop it', 1959.
[67] British Library, 'Fluoridation'.
[68] 'Clean food or pure food? Why not both?' *HT*, 6 (February 1954), 4.
[69] Campbell, *Iron Ladies*, 75–6.

industrialized farms and processing plants would do more harm than good, they insisted, and the nation needed to return to traditional methods of farming and, indeed, traditional patterns of eating. From this perspective, the Ministry of Health's fluoridation proposals were but one more indication of the extent to which the 'chemicalization' of food had advanced in Britain—and the extent to which the state was supporting, even hastening, its advancement. In this way, organicist and anti-statist sentiments easily intertwined, and the 'gentlemen in Whitehall' emerged as a major threat to both the physical and political health of the nation.

It is also worth noting that the anti-statist arguments of the housewives did not result in anti-fluoridationism becoming a characteristically New Right cause in subsequent decades. Two of the most outspoken proponents of classical liberalism, Enoch Powell and Keith Joseph, actually encouraged state action on behalf of fluoridation during their years overseeing the NHS—and, indeed, regarded the anti-fluoridation movement as a troublesome obstruction to their efforts.[70] Quite simply, fluoridation promised economic benefits that accorded well with the budget-trimming goals of the New Right. For a few pence a person annually, the fluoridation of public water supplies could potentially save millions in dental health care. As the costs of the NHS soared well beyond original expectations, Powell and Joseph were more than willing to measure the bottom line of fluoridation in pounds rather than liberty. It was this perspective that the Thatcher administration upheld in the 1980s. Even as Thatcher attacked the 'nanny state' for its insidious corrosion of personal responsibility and pledged to reduce the scope of state intervention, her administration enacted the Water (Fluoridation) Act of 1985 to place fluoridation on a firm legal footing. The contradictions did not go unnoticed by the anti-fluoridation camp. As Keith Best, MP for Ynys Mon, quoted from a letter to *The Listener*: 'Who would dream that Mrs Thatcher, who says she is inflexible when defending the freedom of choice of the individual, would preside over a Parliament whisking through a scheme that would not disgrace a totalitarian regime?'[71] Thatcher may have railed against the state with an angry conviction on a par with the BHL, but when it came to fluoridation she, too, chose pounds over liberty.

[70] Powell was Minister of Health from 1960 to 1963, and Joseph was Secretary of State for Social Services from 1970 to 1974. For their attitudes on fluoridation see TNA: PRO, MH 148/177, speech by Powell, 17 May 1963; TNA: PRO, MH 148/504, letter from Joseph to William Whitelaw, 20 October 1970.

[71] *Parliamentary Debates* (Commons), 84, 24 October 1985, 503.